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TAGS: PGOV EAID ECON PHUM KDEM PREL GA

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: FURTHER JUSTIFICATION FOR ESF PROJECT

REF: A. BANJUL 231  
    1B. STATE 59002  
    1C. BANJUL 187  
    1D. BANJUL 233

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) We view our proposed ESF project with IFES as of vital importance for The Gambia's electoral process. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), charged with conducting The Gambia's 2006-7 Presidential and National Assembly elections, is an imperfect institution, but nonetheless has run elections deemed credible by the international community. We are encouraged by opposition parties' professed determination to participate in the upcoming contests as well as other foreign donors' aid plans.

Despite President Jammeh's erratic behavior and clear distaste for the opposition, sources rule out his massively rigging the elections or so harassing the opposition that it cannot campaign effectively -- but the "Jammeh factor" requires careful monitoring of the electoral process and maintaining pressure for credible contests. END SUMMARY

OUR ESF PROJECT PROPOSAL

12. (SBU) Ref a contains post's proposed \$300,000 ESF project with IFES in support of The Gambia's preparations for its Presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled for October 2006 and January 2007, respectively. As the deadline for submission of ESF proposals approaches (ref b), we wish to reiterate our view that USG assistance for The Gambia's electoral process here is of vital importance. As we have previously argued (ref c), the coup plot thwarted here March 21 only highlights the fragility of the country's democratic process and the consequent need for assistance, in particular, to bolster the capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), charged with conducting the 2006-7 contests.

THE IEC

13. (C) The IEC itself is an imperfect institution, with limited staff and expertise. It is headed by a Board of Commissioners composed of nominally non-partisan figures, among them, retired government bureaucrats. Our sense is that chairman Ndondi Njie, a former educator, and his fellow commissioners recognize the need to address election-related concerns of the opposition parties as well as those of the GOTG/ruling APRC party -- but if there is a slant in a given IEC decision, it is likely to be in the latter's favor. At the same time, we also believe that the IEC commissioners recognize the importance of conducting elections that, at the

end of the day, are seen as credible at home and abroad. In this respect, it is worth noting that the IEC-supervised Presidential and National Assembly elections of 2001-2 were deemed credible by the international community (including the U.S.) as were the National Assembly by-elections of September 2005.

#### OPPOSITION'S DETERMINATION TO PARTICIPATE

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¶4. (C) We are encouraged by opposition parties' determination to participate in both the Presidential and National Assembly contests, unlike the previous round in 2001-2, when the country's largest opposition party, the United Democratic Party (UDP), boycotted the National Assembly elections. In April 14 conversation with pol/econoff, UDP head Oussainou Darboe reaffirmed his party's commitment to participating in both upcoming contests and asserted that all other opposition parties would do so as well. Echoing other opposition politicians, Darboe acknowledged the IEC's imperfections, but judged that the opposition parties and their candidates would have sufficient opportunity to compete for office to warrant their participation. He also opined that President Jammeh, in the aftermath of the failed coup plot, would refrain from a crackdown on the opposition parties that would rule out their being able to campaign effectively in the run-up to the 2006-7 elections. Darboe stressed the importance of international support, i.e., IFES, to the IEC.

#### DECISION OF OTHER DONORS TO ASSIST

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¶5. (C) We are also encouraged by the professed commitment by other donors to provide election-related assistance. Ref c reports assistance plans by the UK's aid agency, Department for International Development (DFID), EU, and UN; we have also gotten indications that other donors may also step forward, e.g., the Japanese and the Commonwealth organization. Most recently, in April 19 conversation with Ambassador, UNDP Resident Representative said the establishment of a donors "basket fund" for election-related assistance was on track.

#### CONCLUDING OBSERVATION -- THE JAMMEH FACTOR

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¶6. (C) President Jammeh's penchant for erratic behavior and his distaste for the opposition parties -- as reflected in his harsh criticisms at an April 15 rally (ref d) -- raise the possibility of an abrupt move by him either to massively rig the elections or so harass the opposition that they cannot campaign effectively. At this point, we are inclined to rule out either scenario -- and we note that the opposition does so as well, judging from UDP head Darboe's remarks. At this point, we note the assessment of various sources, none of them Jammeh supporters, that the President is confident that he will win in the 2006 election and that his party will win a majority of seats in the subsequent National Assembly balloting -- but also recognizes that contests seen as rigged or devoid of significant opposition will deprive him and his party of the legitimacy he prizes. At this point, we have no basis for challenging the foregoing assessment, but the "Jammeh factor" only heightens the need for careful monitoring of the electoral process and maintaining pressure for credible contests.